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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the crisis of confidence in the nation's schools, argues that the basic premise of school management rests on the concept that schools exist for students and their parents, and describes the public challenge to one school system. The author outlines the steps taken by the Niles Township, Illinois, Board and community to provide a school environment that places equal stress on both the personal and the social development of students. A major theme of the paper is that it is at the management level that the community of students and parents is able to address itself most effectively to change and improvement in the schools. (Author/JF)

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Practical Tips On Handling The Community Power Crunch
A Case Study of The Niles Township High Schools

by
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My remarks center on three ideas - the crisis of confidence in our schools, a basic premise of school management, and the long year and a look ahead at Niles.

The decade of the Sixties was a revolutionary epoch in American education, but the revolution was not in the schools. The two most powerful forces for educational reform that have appeared in this century--the civil rights movement and the student rebellion--stirred widespread ferment and dramatized the desperate need for radical reformation of the educational enterprise, but ultimately they proved only how resistant our educational institutions are to change. The revolution came, not in the schools, but in our view of them in our changing conception of the nature of childhood, and what society, through its schools, should do for children, rather than to them.

During the early years of the decade the civil rights movement pricked the conscience of the nation and sparked a massive drive to give reality to the ideal of equal educational opportunity.

The student rebellion, on the other hand, made clear that in large part the schools were failing the advantaged as well as the deprived. The pervasive emphasis on conformity rather than creativity, on discipline rather than independence, on the defensive "putdown" rather than student support, on quiet orderliness rather than on the joy of discovery, on the neatness of administrative convenience rather than the often untidy environment of true learning--all highlighted the authoritarian rigidities of the system.

The result was a new mood of questioning--particularly of the public school "monopoly"--and a search for alternatives. Fifty or a hundred years ago, the concept

EA 004 220

of free public education for all children embodied the highest ideals of an expanding democracy. And over the years the public schools have developed a mystique that viewed them as the very foundation stone upon which democratic society stands. But during the Sixties the schools were challenged increasingly, not only for their contemporary failures, nor even for the fact that they have always failed the poor and the dispossessed, but because they were positively destructive influences for many of the children entrusted to their care. Questions were raised as to whether any institution that enjoys a virtual monopoly can remain sensitive and responsive to the changing needs of its diverse clientele. Clearly, at the end of the decade, the nation was experiencing a crisis of confidence in its schools.

The fundamental task for education in the Seventies, it seems equally clear, is to put it all back together again--to help, or force, the schools to become more responsive to the varied needs of children, to open up the system so that its most repressive and destructive characteristics are mitigated, if not eliminated, to remember that children, too, are human beings who deserve to be treated with as much dignity and respect as other humans, to keep clearly in mind that the objective is the development of children, not the preservation of an institution. And, perhaps most difficult of all, ways must be sought to nurture a wider spectrum of youthful talents and tastes, aptitudes and aspirations.

My basic premise is that schools exist for the students and their parents. It was not ordained that professional educators, i.e. administrators and teachers, decide what is good for children and impose their will upon others. The posture of administration should be to see students and parents as active, thoughtful allies of the administrative staff, to be warmly accepted as partners in determining future activities in the schools. The student is to be seen not as an untamed bundle of energy to be subdued, but rather as an infinitely valuable human being who desperately needs to be understood, appreciated, and helped.

The major purpose of the administrative staff must be to convert the considerable resources of a district to helping students in ways in which both they and their parents understand and agree to be worthwhile.

The best way for me to talk about "Practical Tips on Handling Power Crunches with Community Groups" is (1) to define a power crunch in 1972 in a very broad way - as the challenge of many of the publics in the school-community to our total system of public education and (2) to tell you what we have done in the Niles Township High Schools to meet this challenge.

The school year 1970-71 began -- almost as if it should -- with groups of parents, students, and staff members listing what the schools weren't doing, or, were doing wrong. In sheer numbers, but mostly in kind, the problems identified indicated that the Niles Township High Schools -- our schools -- were in trouble. The educational goals were ten years old, the curriculum was still geared to the college student, and while innovation and change were evident, both appeared to be unpatterned and at random.

The community, which for years had boasted of its schools, suddenly began looking the other way -- subtly questioning their direction. While the price -- taxes -- was going up, production and the product wasn't keeping pace. Students were "... getting away with everything at school;" "teachers ... didn't care;" and the administration" ... had other things to do." It began as a frustrating year for the community.

Appropriately, however, it began with a new Superintendent who believed that the community deserved and wished to have a great school system; it began with a School Board equally committed to greatness. The move off center was inevitable. And, what may have appeared to be confusion, poor planning, or lack of direction during the long year was little more than a school system trying ever so hard to stay in the sixties.

We pointed out to our community that a school system is essentially an organization of people committed to providing an appropriate education for young people. The potential for quality in that school system rests with several groups of people who

make up the system.

We asked the Board of Education to authorize use of those groups to take a close look at the schools' many problems. Problem-Sensing teams from the District's three schools -- made up of more than 350 students, parents, teachers, administrators, and Board members -- spent September and October in 1970 discussing, listing, and categorizing problems.

There were many.

Problems in such areas as curriculum, communication, student behavior, the physical plants, and school management were high on the list of the 30 Problem-Sensing teams. One which seemed to be central to all was the school's lack of concern for the individual -- be he student, parent, teacher, or resident. Closely tied to that problem was another: The schools' traditional emphasis on academic values as opposed to humanistic values. "The curriculum is too rigid, is college-oriented, and permits too little involvement for change," was the consensus of many reports.

The nature of most of the problems was such that solutions would take months, even years. "Curriculum, communication, behavior, and management can't be changed to everyone's satisfaction over-night," "but, we're ready to begin," said our administration.

Beginning meant further involvement. The general problem-solving strategy included four basic steps: (1) defining the problem; (2) discussion of the problems involving those groups most directly concerned; (3) recommendations for one or more solutions to the problem; and, (4) implementation of the final decision.

Throughout the year, teams of representative groups began their work. This work has expanded this year. At East High School, for instance, more than 15 Improvement Teams began deliberations. Improvement Teams -- made up of parents, students, and staff members -- were set up to seek solutions to problems in the following areas: discipline procedures; lay supervisor-student relationships; final examinations; student cafeteria and lounge; school spirit and student government; and several others.

Many of the recommendations growing out of the efforts of the Niles East Improvement Teams were implemented during the past year and this fall. The other two schools, in a number of different ways, set out to seek solutions to the problems identified there.

At the District level, a Council of PTA, Student Government, Teacher Union, and Administrative representatives sensed the need for a new set of District educational goals in light of the identified problems, and set about that task. The Council's efforts -- presented to the Board of Education in January of 1971 -- were unanimously endorsed.

Essentially, the new goals statement calls for a commitment on the part of the Board and community to provide a school environment which places equal stress on the student's personal, and social development -- as well as his intellectual development -- a significant change from former District Goals.

The new goals constitute a significant change in the direction of the Nilehi District. Throughout, there is a greater recognition of the importance of the individual, his background, his present needs, and his future aspirations.

"The new goals," we said "will guide all our efforts in the years ahead. We must budget, manage, and teach toward achievement of those goals."

Of paramount importance to the Board of Education was the development of an organizational structure that would facilitate progress toward achievement of the New District Goals. A structure too, that would provide for appropriate involvement in the process of change, and that would be clearly understood by all.

The traditional school management plan calls for change to originate at the top -- with the Board and Superintendent -- and to filter down to the schools and the classroom. While perhaps more expedient, that plan fails to take account or make use of the interests of those most rightfully concerned with change and the

education process: the student and parent. Under the new Program Planning Budgeting System (PPBS), the process is balanced -- with change originating at the bottom but managed at the top.

From a budgeting standpoint, PPBS provides a more orderly reclassification of expenditures into classifications called Programs. A Program is simply an area of operation within the schools or District which, amongst other things has a unique purpose in relation to the overall District Goals, has a budget for personnel and other expenditures, and is managed by a Program Director or Manager. An example of a Program would be the mathematics department at Niles East High School. Similarly, the math departments at North and West are separate Programs. All costs related to teaching youngsters math at each school are identified under one general heading in PPBS instead of being lost in a maze of details, within such classifications as teacher salaries, instructional materials, custodial staff, District Office services, and the like. From a budgeting standpoint then, it is easy for the community to take account of where its money is going for education, where its priorities are -- a most important factor in light of the new District Goals. A handy reference point may be found by tabulating the total dollars expended per pupil in each program.

Program Budgeting and Program Management are inexorably tied and it's at the management level that the community of students and parents is able to address itself most effectively to change and improvement in its schools. A fundamental principle in handling today's power crunches.

Each Program Director in the schools this year was asked to and did set up a Program Advisory Committee made up of representative students and parents. The Advisory Committee, with the Program Manager, was and is responsible for reviewing the present program and making recommendations for its improvement and change. Any revision in the program -- such as new courses -- as well as the program budget must have the approval of this 6 - 8 member committee. Thus, the community, through the Program Advisory Committee, is able to effect changes and improvements in its curriculum.

During the past year, and for years prior to that, each of the high schools operated with 15 academic programs. Despite the many management-related responsibilities of these departmental chairmen, their salaries (including stipends), fringe benefits, and general working conditions were bargained for by the Teachers' Union.

The Board and Superintendent sought a structure which would make possible a high level of control yet one that was sensitive to the interests and needs of the individuals and groups the schools serve; a structure capable of being carefully disciplined, yet able to flex and experiment when that became necessary.

Essentially, the new structure reduces the number of personnel in management and management-related roles at each school from 21 to 8. This management plan is much less costly than the one it replaced. Each school's management team (with minor variations) is composed of: one building principal, director of building management, director of student physical welfare, a director of student services, and four directors of instructional groups.

The emphasis in this new management plan is to utilize highly qualified and specially trained personnel in clearly defined roles designed to improve instruction and better the education of our young people. These individuals are given the kind of responsibility and authority that permits them to make decisions -- decisions for which they will be held totally accountable.

This management structure no longer frustrates the Board in implementing District educational goals and objectives. Never again should a student or parent -- concerned and frustrated about school -- receive the answer: "That's beyond my control," or "That's his responsibility -- I can't do anything about it."

A Look Ahead: Real, not phony involvement, new goals, and a management structure to achieve them -- the three most important products of the long year and a half. Because of all three, our community power crunches are being negated and confidence in us is slowly coming back. All three portend a future of great proportions for the Niles Township High School District, its students, and parents.

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